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ABSTRACT

The idea that education is connected to economic development and that the economy can be strengthened by strengthening education has become a cornerstone of the 1980s educational reform movement. The basic idea linking education and the economy is not new. Americans have invested in education with the expectation that it would yield substantial financial returns, for a well-prepared workforce is more productive and innovative than an undereducated workforce. The current educational emphasis of raising academic standards to produce better graduates equipped to make more productive contributions to the economy will be useful to students able to cope successfully with expanded demands; however there is a downside. Raising standards without improving the attractiveness or holding power of schools is likely to increase the dropout rate. A policy designed to promote economic growth may exacerbate current economic problems in specific places like Appalachia. Having to complete a greater number of harder courses will produce more dropouts, making economic matters worse. In Appalachia, the existing connection between education and development seems negative. Taught to be passive and deferential, Appalachian youth have been treated as not especially bright, and they have been trained not to expect bright futures. Another negative connection between education and economic development in Appalachia is the inadequate financial support for schools through low property taxes. Schools are an undervalued resource for Appalachian development, but in fact they have great potential for community revitalization. Programs which make a positive, appropriate linkage between rural education and rural development are needed. (ALL)

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MAKING DOLLARS BY MAKING SENSE
LINKING RURAL EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT IN APPALACHIA

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The idea that education is connected to economic development has become one of the cornerstones of the educational reform movement in the 1980s.

This is a different rationale for making education a societal priority than the one espoused in the late 1950s and 1960s during the last big push for school improvement. At that time, the launch of Sputnik, the Cuban missile crisis and the undeniable emergence of the Soviet Union as a superpower startled America's leaders into action on the educational front. The desire to "keep up with the Russians," militarily and technologically, gave rise to a heightened emphasis on science instruction, the "new math" and such major federal legislation as the National Defense Education Act.

In the public arena, economic development was not seen as a primary mission (or key consequence) of educational improvement. America was the unchallenged economic leader of the world, and "made in Japan" still carried the derogatory implication of being cheap junk.

How times have changed! Here we are only a generation later: the world's biggest debtor nation and struggling hard this time to "keep up with the Japanese," economically. Accordingly, our leaders are more interested in schooling as a tool of international economic competition than as a means of national military defense.

The rhetoric about strengthening the economy by strengthening education is flowing hot and heavy across our nation. Hardly a month passes without a new "blue ribbon commission," "prestigious task force" or "prominent leader" exhorting us to get off our behinds and begin making connections between education and the economy.

What is this rhetoric all about? What has it got to do with the day to day realities of Appalachia's schools and communities? How can we make sense of the "newfangled" idea that all our schools are supposed to become powerful engines of economic competitiveness?

The first thing to understand is that much of this rhetoric is nothing more than the heavy breathing of some weighty groups chasing the latest bandwagon. To the extent that corporate leaders can blame the education sector for our nation's economic woes, they can divert attention away their own short-sightedness, greed and poor management. Even better, they often are able to accomplish this sleight of hand while enhancing their image as caring citizens concerned about the welfare of our nation's young people. Whatever the motivation, some of the measures advocated by the corporate sector have a hard time holding up under even mild scrutiny.

After all, it's very hard to figure out how requiring every student to pass a calculus class in order to graduate from high school will reduce America's trade imbalance. Are we to believe that America would regain a bigger piece of the world economic pie, if only more of us could remember how to calculate "pi"? Similarly, the connections between increasing science instruction and reducing the federal deficit are obscure at best. Blaming the schools for the state of our economy is a lot like blaming the folks on Sesame Street for what's been happening on Wall Street.

Given the amount of "school-bashing" that has accompanied this new call for reform, why have so many prominent educators been willing to jump on the bandwagon? One reason is that they

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(shrewdly and correctly) surmised that the outcome would be a great deal of new money (as well as power and, ironically, prestige) flowing into their own hands.

Besides, educators are quite accustomed, and almost indifferent, to harsh criticism. Like a shock resistant watch, we educators are remarkably able to "take a licking and keep on ticking"! Moreover, educational administrators and policymakers have a long, consistent history of being highly deferential to corporate leaders. Whether out of respect, fear, insecurity, or a desire to be seen as their public sector peers, the fact remains that the major trend in twentieth century educational **leadership** has been to **follow** the perceived direction of private industry.

The second thing to understand about linking education and the economy is that the basic idea here is anything but new. The rhetoric may have changed slightly. However, Americans have long thought about education in instrumental terms. A love of poetic expression, a respect for purely abstract pursuits and a belief in the intrinsic worth of learning have never been the primary motivations for the enormous "investment" our nation has made in public schooling. Rather, we have "invested" in education because of our faith that it, like any good investment, would yield substantial financial returns.

Of course, our faith has been largely justified. For millions of people, in generation after generation, education has been one of the keys to individual economic progress and to societal prosperity. It is trite but true to observe that a well-prepared workforce (however defined) will be more productive and innovative than an illiterate, unskilled, undereducated workforce.

What has been poorly understood (or, at least, little discussed) are the complexities of the wide range of connections existing between education and economic development. Many of the current schemes reflect a pretty simplistic view of what these connections are all about and how to make them stronger.

Basically, we can see three major thrusts underway. One is to prepare better "job applicants," that is, graduates with the technical, behavioral, and communication skills necessary to move into available entry level jobs. Another is to produce "better educated graduates" who have the "basic skills," plus the technological sophistication, necessary to be trainable and retrainable on the job (or at the post-secondary level). And finally, for those from professional/managerial families or with professional/managerial aspirations, the thrust has been to provide a more challenging college preparatory curriculum.

One of the common threads running through all three of the current thrusts is an emphasis on the individual. Schools are seen as important, in economic terms, to the extent that they prepare individuals to participate productively in the larger economy after they have left school. As will be discussed later, the role of schools as institutional forces in the economic development process remains largely undefined.

Where will these major thrusts in school reform take us? Certainly, they will be useful to the students willing and able to cope successfully with the expanded demands placed upon their shoulders. In turn, these "better" graduates probably will be equipped to make more than productive contributions to the economy than might otherwise be the case.

However, it is worth remembering that there also is a downside here. For example, by raising "academic standards" without improving either the attractiveness or the holding power of schools, the likelihood is that the dropout rate will significantly increase in the years ahead. Appalachian students who already are unsuccessful, bored or mistreated in school, or who have families needing their income, or who have babies of their own, won't stick around to graduate because German 2 will soon be available,

or because they now have to complete an even greater number of more difficult courses in order to graduate.

Ironically, a general policy designed to promote economic growth actually may end up exacerbating current economic problems in specific places like Appalachia. To the extent that we produce more dropouts, we will make matters worse. After all, we know that dropouts are the most economically marginal (and vulnerable) population. Aside from curtailing the life chances of these young people, creating more dropouts will place an anchor around the neck of local and regional economies already finding it difficult to stay afloat.

This is not the first instance of there being a negative connection between education and economic development in Appalachia. Think, for example, of the ways in which Appalachian youth, especially low-income students, have been socialized in our schools. To an unfortunate degree, the negative self-images, low self-esteem and fatalism these children sometimes brought with them from home have been reinforced by their schooling.

All too often, Appalachian children have been taught to be passive and highly deferential to any authority. They were trained to be docile followers far more often than they were assisted to develop into leaders, or even into active citizens. They often were not treated as if they were especially bright, nor as if they could expect very bright futures. In an attempt to be "realistic," Appalachian youths were encouraged away from whatever professional, managerial and entrepreneurial aspirations they may have had, while pointed instead toward of a variety of more modest working class occupations. In short, they were taught **how to fit** into a depressed, and often exploitative, local economy, rather than being taught how to improve the economy, or receive a better deal within it.

That's not a very helpful strategy for promoting genuine rural development. If rural children grow up believing that they're not important, that where they come from is not valued and that the "good life" is to be found elsewhere, how could we expect to have the attitudinal base necessary to spark a rural rejuvenation effort?

Another negative connection between education and economic development in Appalachia can be seen in the structure of the region's property assessment and tax systems. There is a legacy across Appalachia of low property taxes, and thus, of inadequate financial support for schools dependent upon these local taxes.

As documented in extraordinary detail by the Appalachian Alliance and the Highlander Center in their now-classic land ownership study, this "revenue shortfall" is the result of the largest and wealthiest owners (most of whom are either absentee owners or corporations) being granted ridiculous concessions allowing them to avoid paying anything resembling a fair share of the tax burden. "Ordinary" Appalachian schools and "ordinary" Appalachian children have been denied the educational resources they needed, and had every right to expect, from local property taxes, so that the already rich and powerful landholders could be "spared the burden" of paying their fair share of the tax bill.

Appalachia already has a long, but sorry, history of education and economic development being intimately connected. When young people here are effectively excluded from the region's good jobs because they are high school dropouts or "pushouts," then one can see the powerful connection between education and economic development. When students are socialized to accept low aspirations, low self-esteem and low wages as being "good enough for people like them," then one can see the powerful connection between education and economic development. When the school curriculum (implicitly and explicitly) teaches young Appalachians to believe in the self-fulfilling negative prophecy that the rural decline is inevitable, and thus, community revitalization is nothing more than a

pipedream, then one can see the powerful connection between education and economic development. And finally, when Appalachian schools and children are routinely shortchanged as the price of corporate extraction of the region's wealth, then one can see the powerful connection between education and economic development.

Given this legacy of historic "connections" that politicians and educational reformers never seem to mention, is it any wonder that some folks are less than enthusiastic at the prospect of making such linkages even tighter? Clearly, this pattern is not good enough. It is not what Appalachian children deserve. It is not the best we can do.

So, what are the alternatives? Should we sever all connections between education and economic development? Throw all the bastards out and start again from scratch? Create a network of alternative, private schools? None of these are real alternatives, and the idea of severing the connection is just plain impossible, no matter what we do. The fact of the matter is that education and economic development are inherently and inextricably linked.

The real issue is not whether there will be a linkage here, nor even how close this connection should be. The only real issue is who will be the primary beneficiaries of these inevitable connections.

If we say our goal is to benefit rural Appalachian children and rural Appalachian communities first and foremost (instead of last and least), then what could, and should, we do?

The first answer is to reverse the negative traditions we continue to perpetuate even today. We need to stem the flood of school dropouts, not through a public relations campaign to convince students that staying in school won't be as negative an experience as they anticipate, but rather by really changing the school's program and environment in ways that better serve the majority of Appalachian students who are not responding well to current methods and curricula.

We need to bolster the self-esteem of all students, and to help them develop in ways that foster pride in who they are and where they come from. We need to help young people not only believe in a bright future for themselves and their community, but also acquire the experience, understanding and skills they must have to make that bright future a reality. And, of course, we need a fair system of collecting and distributing tax revenues, at both the school district and state levels, so that the schools finally have a reasonable financial base upon which to build.

Is there any hope of achieving these goals? The resounding answer is "YES." The keys are to begin seeing and treating:

- the school as an agency of rural development;
- the community as the foundation of the school's curriculum; and
- the students and teachers as both active learners and active citizens.

The idea here is not to burden students, teachers and school administrators with yet another set of demands that will divert them from their fundamental educational mission. Rather, the proposal is to make the school and community genuine partners in their mutual revitalization.

What can schools bring to this partnership? How can they serve as effective agencies of rural development? After all, it is very rare for an Appalachian school to have any teachers or administrators who are economic experts.

And yet, upon further reflection, it becomes clear that our educational institutions represent a previously overlooked and undervalued resource for rural development. In fact, schools have great potential to enhance the process of community revitalization. Given this

reality, doesn't it follow that they have both a right and a responsibility to develop their potential?

Think, for example, about the following development-related resources associated with even modestly-endowed schools in all parts of Appalachia:

1. **Facilities** -- Schools are a significant physical presence and a major "public infrastructure" investment. In many rural communities, they are the only public space. Schools can serve as a meeting place and a community center where a wide variety of groups can come together to work and play. They also can serve as institutions that can "incubate" a host of rural development initiatives from cottage industries to community celebrations, and from a local newspaper to a child care center.

2. **Materials and Equipment** -- With their fleets of school buses, vans, driver's education cars and other vehicles, schools could become the backbone of a badly-needed rural public transportation system. The school's computers, duplicating equipment, machinery, library, and other physical resources also could be used by (or in support of) numerous community groups and agencies.

3. **Purchasing Power** -- School systems spend a relatively large amount of money on items other than salaries and fringe benefits. In most rural communities, they have the potential to be the largest local buyer of such things as office supplies, furniture, books, electrical equipment and materials, food, plastic and paper products, fuel, and various services from construction to screen printing. Schools could choose to support their own economy by buying locally whenever possible. They also could use this purchasing power to help initiate, expand and sustain a variety of local enterprises (including those launched by rural students).

4. **Payroll Power** -- In many rural communities, the school system is the largest, and best paying, employer around. Although the downside here can be seen in the "patronage" abuses common in some areas of Appalachia, there is no denying the positive economic impact of all those salary dollars circulating around the local and regional economy. For instance, many Appalachian farms and small businesses have been able to stay afloat because a family member receives a regular paycheck by working at the school.

5. **Financial Capacity** -- Rural schools have the potential to tap a variety of state, federal and private foundation funding sources unavailable to rural economic development groups. For instance, there are tens of millions of vocational education dollars poured into Appalachian schools every year that could be "redirected" toward more economically-relevant activities (such as entrepreneurship).

In addition, schools have the capacity to issue bonds in order to finance their capital requirements. If a school district can float a bond to build a multi-million dollar vocational education center, why couldn't they use this method to underwrite the costs of a school-based small business incubator?

6. **Political Identity** -- In many rural communities, the local school (especially if it has not been consolidated recently), is the one remaining public institution in which people feel they have a common stake. In fact, the school sometimes defines the informal boundaries of the larger community, while providing a sense of local identity. This special status of rural schools, along with their basic credibility, could allow them to play a catalytic role in rallying the whole community around rural development initiatives.

7. **Courses** -- From teaching accounting courses to local business people, to directing student research and analyses of the local economy, Appalachian schools could choose to redirect their curricula in ways fostering an economic rejuvenation of their communities. Equally important, they could teach courses to young people and adults alike dealing with the meanings

and possible directions of "development" in the context of their own local area and region. Such courses might help inspire confidence and hope about the area's future, instead of acquiescing to the fatalism and negativity that so often characterize Appalachian attitudes toward the future.

8. **School Staff** -- Particularly in relatively poor and isolated Appalachian communities, the school's staff represents the greatest concentration of well-educated people in the area. This impressive pool of skills, talents, experience, training and professional/business contacts is present at the school every day, but it is only rarely tapped by the community as a key human resource for rural economic development. If these staff talents were "unleashed," as an integral part of their official duties, in conjunction with community efforts and revitalization projects, then there is a good chance that both education and the economy would be improved as a result.

9. **Students** -- Last, but far from least, schools contain an amazing resource: that is, the energy, idealism, creativity and talents of our young people. Properly encouraged, instructed and guided, Appalachian students could make major contributions to the betterment of their own communities. This has been demonstrated (albeit sporadically) over the years in a variety of efforts from vocational agriculture/4H, to "youth service" activities, to the Foxfire program.

Many students would leap at the chance to escape the confines of the classroom and to engage in "real work" as young adults willing and able to make a difference in the "real world." Many communities need the spark these youths could provide. Such activities have long term payoffs, ranging from motivating students to stay and succeed in school, to re-instilling their faith in the strengths, values and prospects of their own hometowns.

Appalachian schools could be a terrific resource, not only for students as they strive to reach their highest individual potential, but also for communities as they strive to reach their highest collective potential. They could be such a resource, but all too often they are not.

What we are sorely lacking at the moment is a vision of rural education and development worthy of the name. There has been a serious failure of imagination in this regard. We have an opportunity unprecedented in our history for Appalachian schools and communities to be strong and vital. However, that opportunity is slipping away from us, largely because of our seeming inability to even conceive of what an excellent **rural** education or a vibrant, non-exploitative **rural** economy might be like.

There are at least a couple of directions in which we might turn for that vision. Instead of being embarrassed about our rurality and our Appalachian identity, we should embrace them. Instead of educators and development specialists treating local people as clients, we all ought to act as full and equal partners in the revitalization process. Instead of passively acquiescing to a standardized, metropolitan-oriented model of education, we should derive our curricula and our teaching methods from the realities of the rural communities in which our students are growing up. Instead of being incidental, we need to make the local community and the Appalachian region the foundation of our schools' curricula.

It is astonishing that as our "post-industrial" society enters into the "information age," so many educational and political leaders still believe it is necessary to put children on buses for long periods each day so they can attend school at a "central location" in order to receive an adequate education. It is worth remembering that the traditional high school classroom with a specialist teacher lecturing passive students during fifty minute lesson segments is not the only way (nor even the best way for many students) to learn what is necessary to become productive adults and competent

citizens. Why transport children long distances to where we have stored the resources, when it is fully within our technological capability to bring a vast array of educational resources directly to them?

We could choose to combine advanced technologies with a re-establishment of meaningful school-community bonds. This merger of high tech instruction and community-based learning could yield powerful results. We could create a new kind of rural education that took full advantage of its rurality, while simultaneously tapping the best external resources available. The basic idea is to select the best features of each existing unit in order to create a stronger, more vital "hybrid."

Although our actual knowledge of, and experience with, advanced educational technologies is embryonic, our technological vision probably still exceeds our vision of rural community-based learning. Two brief examples, one from an elementary school and one from a high school, might illustrate how the ancient rural tradition of locally-relevant education might be revived in a manner consistent with the demands and opportunities present in Appalachia today.

Faith Dunne tells about a rural elementary school teacher who decided to use her community as the focal point of the curriculum. This teacher had a multigrade classroom, but the children all shared a fascination with dinosaurs. The area was one that happened to be rich in fossils, so she decided to take advantage of this combination of student interests and local resources. She put aside her "normal" lesson plans and devoted the year to the dinosaur project.

Her students went out on "digs," learned to excavate and identify fossils, and called upon the "expertise" of local people. For math, the kids weighed, measured, added, subtracted and otherwise used the bones and artifacts they had uncovered. For art, they drew pictures and made models of dinosaurs. For language, they read books about prehistoric life, wrote dinosaur-inspired poems and stories, and learned how to spell a range of difficult words related to this theme. For science, they conducted experiments related to their project and made good use of the remarkable natural laboratory to be found in the community around them.

The point is that she saw her community not in terms of it lacked, but rather in terms of what it had. She found a variety of creative ways to build upon the community's resources and make them educational. This ability to transform the community into an educational resource is rarely encouraged among teachers today. The rise of standardization, the development of "teacher proof curricula," and the pressure to "cover" a certain body of material (or number of pages) by a specified date all have had the unfortunate effect of discouraging and devaluing locally-generated, community-based educational programs.

And yet, as this teacher demonstrated, locally-relevant education need not be second rate. In fact, community-based learning can be as sure a path to educational excellence as any other one known. Moreover, it can have a profound effect on the long-term development of the local community. The children participating in the dinosaur project couldn't help thinking of their community as a fascinating, worthwhile, and important place. This, in turn, creates the kind of positive attitudes required to achieve (or even seek) genuine rural development.

A more direct example of making a positive, appropriate linkage between rural education and rural development can be found in the story of St. Pauls High School. It is a good example of one of those "Only in America!" tales. After all, where else but in America would one find a Methodist minister helping a tri-racial group of rural high school students to create a New York-style Jewish Delicatessen right in their very own hometown?

Unlikely as it may seem, the Way Off

Broadway Delicatessen, located at the St. Pauls, North Carolina exit from Interstate-95, did open its doors for business in 1987. Their fine deli sandwiches and frozen yogurt quickly made them popular among local residents and interstate travelers alike. The deli is decorated with the Broadway theme in mind, from the showtunes playing in the restaurant to authentic theatrical posters on the walls.

The fourteen young people who are the paid worker-owners of this cooperative enterprise are learning while they're earning. They have hired an experienced adult manager to provide on-the-job management training. They also take entrepreneurship-related courses for regular academic credit at St. Pauls High School.

With the active assistance of their superintendent, good teachers, and a very supportive community, these students certainly have every chance of long-term success as rural entrepreneurs.

The excitement in St. Pauls is a direct result of a program being pioneered by the University of North Carolina's Small Business and Technology Development Center. The program for rural school-based enterprise has four primary goals: 1) to help rural schools become effective small business incubators; 2) to help participants develop competence in entrepreneurship and business management; 3) to help create good new jobs through finding and exploiting untapped opportunities in the local economy; and 4) to help foster economic literacy and a sense of empowerment.

The basic idea of the rural school-based enterprise program is simple. Rural students research, plan, set up, operate, and own economically viable small businesses in cooperation with local educational institutions. The program contains both a classroom component and an experiential component. As in St. Pauls, the businesses created are neither simulations nor short term educational exercises.

Rather, they are intended to be businesses that will become an ongoing part of the community's economic and employment base. After starting as part of a high school or community college, these enterprises are scheduled to be spun-off by the students who founded them and operated as regular commercial entities within a three-year period.

The rural school-based enterprise program operates as a joint venture of the Small Business and Technology Development Center and North Carolina REAL Enterprises (a non-profit organization). The SBTDC is responsible for all the operational aspects of this program, including training, technical assistance and management support. And North Carolina REAL Enterprises was created to perform the one function that lies beyond the mandate of the SBTDC: to provide a portion of the start-up loans and investments needed to capitalize the rural school-based businesses created.

This program is still in its early stages and there continue to be lots of "bugs" that need to be worked out. It is a difficult program to implement properly. As the program is tested and refined, it doubtless will change.

However, for all the questions that remain about this effort, the basic point is that the rural school-based enterprise program does try to make a connection between education and economic development that benefits local individuals and communities first and foremost. It does try to help schools take a first step in the direction of becoming an agency of rural development. It does try to build an educational program upon the foundation of the local community. And, it does try to encourage and assist teachers and students alike to become active learners and active citizens.

This program is not a panacea for all the ills besetting Appalachian education today. It certainly is not THE ANSWER for all rural schools. Rather, for most people, its importance lies in the glimpse it offers of what a rural vision of

education and development might produce. Without a doubt, the principles embodied here could be translated into other, at least equally valuable, strategies for making the inevitable connections between education and economic development truly beneficial ones for Appalachian students and communities.

In conclusion, it must be noted that Appalachia's legacy of negative linkages between the schools and the economy will neither be eliminated overnight, nor will a more positive set of connections be created without a struggle. However, this struggle is both worthwhile and winnable.

The struggle begins with the **faith** that Appalachia's schools and communities have enormous untapped potential, educationally and economically. This faith must then be translated into a coherent and persuasive **vision** of the educational reforms and economic "developments" that will have the greatest positive impact. Next, this vision must be articulated through the creation of a strong and united rural **voice** speaking on behalf of the interests of "ordinary" Appalachians and their children. And finally, this voice must be made real through the achievement of tangible **victories** (however modest) in our schools and in our communities.

Such struggles succeed only when "ordinary" people -- educators, parents, workers, small business owners, and community leaders -- come together to stride one step at a time toward extraordinary goals. Thus, the real question at this conference is: "What will you do when you return home?"

What will **you** do to foster educational excellence and an economic renaissance across Appalachia? What **will** you do to create the vision, the voice and the victories needed to give substance to the dreams of a better Appalachia? What will you **do**? That is the question and the challenge before all of us today.♦